

*Commemorative Pasts from 15th Century CE:
Examples from Present-day Dinajpur District of
Bangladesh*

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Abstract: Dinajpur is a centuries-old geographical entity that is rich in cultural and historical significance. A large number of inscriptions, historical monuments, and antiquities have been found here, which played a significant role in the process of construction/reconstruction of the history and heritage of this region in particular and 'Bengal' or eastern India in general. This paper highlights the significance of the history and heritage of some commemorative monuments, such as mosques and shrines of Dinajpur (in present-day Bangladesh) from the 15th century, through an analysis of their ground plans and inscriptional evidences. These monuments in Dinajpur serve as definitive proof of the spread of Islam in the region. At the same time, the names of those who contributed to build them are known from the inscriptions. This research shows how these monuments have represented an amalgamation of foreign cultures with the indigenous culture. The paper employs the historical research method with extensive integration of primary and secondary sources to reach a conclusion to the research topic in question.

Key Words: Sufism, Chehel Gazi Mosque, Chehel Gazi Shire

Dinajpur is a place of historical and archeological significance. This place bears historical commemorative pasts throughout its history. Present day Dinajpur was divided into two parts during the Partition of 1947 and became two districts, one in West Bengal, India, and the other in Bangladesh. My focus is to shed light on a few commemorative monuments and heritage objects from the 15th century, located in the present-day Dinajpur district in Bangladesh. A large number of inscriptions have been found here along with a variety of historical monuments and antiquities, which play an important role in reconstructing the historical and cultural heritage of regional Bengal in

general and present-day Dinajpur district of Bangladesh in particular.

The practice of inscribing copperplates and inscriptions in the northern part of Bengal can be traced back to ancient times. Examples such as Damodarpur copperplate inscriptions (1 to 5), Badal inscription, and Tarpandighi copperplate illustrate this tradition. However, the language of these inscriptions was Sanskrit and the purpose was to record land grants or royal grants. But with the arrival of Turko-Persian, Abyssinian (Ethiopian/ African) and Afghan power, there was a change in the concept of inscribing documents in India and Bengal. At that time, inscriptions were engraved on the walls of the mosques and other buildings. The language of all these inscriptions was Arabic or Persian. A large number of such inscriptions have been found so far in the northern part of Bengal region in general and Dinajpur in particular. From a methodical interpretation of all these inscriptions, the name of the sultan/ ruler, extension of their rule, designation, the existence of administrative units, aspects of the contemporary socio-cultural condition can be known. Therefore, the paper highlights the significance of history and heritage of commemorative monuments such as mosques and shrines in Dinajpur (Bangladesh) by analyzing their ground plans and inscriptional evidences.

Research Methodology of the Study

Historical research methodology will be followed here for an understanding of the proposed topic. Both primary and secondary sources will be utilized in a critical methodical manner. However, we have to take into consideration that the paucity of source materials and their peculiar nature make the task of reconstructing history and heritage of commemorative pasts of a particular place in a particular time-frame difficult. From the methodical point of view,

primary sources include field archaeology-based reports and observations. Information collected from relevant books and articles as secondary sources will be used for building up the argumentative basis of the research and reaching a scientific and logical conclusion. Critical analytical scrutiny of both primary and secondary sources will be done on the basis of the information provided by a few selective commemorative monuments, heritage objects and relevant research books and articles.

Literature Review

Although many research books, essays and articles have been published about the history and heritage of regional Bengal within the chronological bracket spanning from 1200 to 1800 CE, no research books/ articles have been written particularly on Dinajpur as such. Of the few inscriptions that have been found, such as the inscription of Chehel Ghazi is very problematic to fix because of its internal missing link. The books that have contributed information as secondary sources are: Shams-ud-din Ahmad's *Inscriptions of Bengal* (1960), Abdul Karim's *Corpus of the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal* (1992) and *Banglar Itihash, Sultani Amal* (1977), Sukhamay Mukhopadhyay's *Banglar Itihaser Du'sho Bochor* (1998), AKM Zakaria's *Bangladesher Pratinasampad* (1984) and *Dinajpur Museum* (1989), and, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. XLII. The books titled *Dinajpur: Itihas O Oitihya* (1996) edited by Sharif Uddin Ahmed, *Dinajpurer Itihas* (1966) by Syed Mosharraf Hossain and a few books written by Mehrab Ali were also helpful.¹

Conceptual Links to the Subject

This article explores the history and heritage of the Dinajpur area now located in the present-day Bangladesh on the basis of the information provided by the inscriptions found in the mosques of Chehel Ghazi and Birol. The inscriptions and

mosques reveal many important historical aspects of Bengal region. All these mosques were constructed between 15th and 18th centuries CE. Some significant changes occurred in the cultural and political arena in northern parts of Bengal region as the builders of these mosques came to this land from the lands beyond this particular territorial space. To explain these new situations, some theoretical understanding can be taken into consideration. In order to explain the religious processes in regional Bengal through the evidences found from commemorative pasts, a few theoretical explanations such as Persuasion Theory, Social Liberation Theory, Cultural Mediator Theory, Frontier theory and Open Village Theory can be used as relevant conceptual frameworks.²

In my opinion, two conceptual discussions by Richard Maxwell Eaton (Frontier Theory)³ and Asim Roy (Cultural Mediator Theory)⁴ would be most relevant to understand my argument of placing Dinajpur as a space for assimilating cultures and creating 'Syncretic Islam.' Eaton sub-divided the Bengal region into many frontiers which were political, Islamic, agrarian, economic and cultural.⁵ According to Eaton, a large number of people migrated to this fertile land, particularly during the time of the Mughal rulers as they granted land to some social leaders for converting arable lands into cultivable ones by clearing jungles and establishing settlements. According to Eaton and Roy, the patronization of rulers and preaching of Islamic sects by Pirs and Sufis made the process effective. They controlled and managed the Khankas, Mosques and Madrashas which could be the places for religious processes in the chronological bracket mentioned above. As the Pirs and Sufis had organizational leadership qualities and charisma, it was quite effective for them to spread their religious-cultural beliefs among the settlers of the land.

It is known that 61 mosques were built between 1450 and 1500 CE.⁶ Most probably the mosques of Chehel Ghazi and Birol were among them⁷. This indicates that new religious

cultures were slowly gaining acceptance among the settlers of the Bengal region. According to Eaton, different sects of Islam became popular in different parts of the region during the period from 1300 to 1600 CE when the process of the formation of cultural traditions was active.⁸ The Shrine cultures (*Majar Culture*) were similar to the rural cultures of regional Bengal. Many cultural traditions from the pre-1300 times continued to the post-1300 period in Bengal region as well.

The Cultural Mediator Theory by Asim Roy mentions that pirs, sufis, dervishes, scriptwriters, poets and litterateurs played the most effective role in the creation of religiously assimilative cultures in the Bengal region. Roy thinks that the Khankas or Dargas attracted early settlers for many reasons, which eventually, in some cases, led to mass conversion to Islam.⁹ To make Islam understandable and acceptable to the peoples of the land, significant changes were made in describing Islamic cultures, rituals and belief systems. Many traditions and stories were presented in a manner that early settlers of the land understood. They also assimilated and accommodated religious little traditions into the fold of Islamic great traditions.

The decoration of the terracotta plaques placed in the mihrab, building materials and the hut shape plan of the mosque of Chehel Ghazi shows the folk/ popular influences in the institutional religions of Bengal. This indicates that the ruler or founder of the mosque accepted the traditional masonry and cultures. According to AF Salahuddin Ahmed, spiritual humanity has always prevailed in the minds of the people of Bengal region rather than the conservative traditional religious mindset of Islam.¹⁰ The commemorative heritage objects such as mosque and shrine of Chehel Ghazi, and inscriptional evidence from Birol, to some extent, validates this statement.

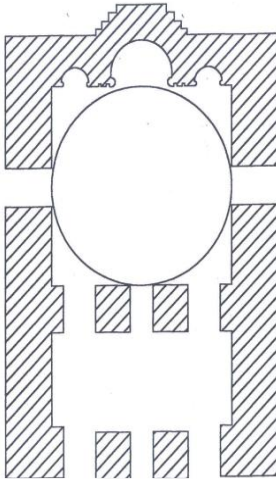
Chehel Ghazi Mosque



The mosque is located at Chehel Ghazi village of Chehel Ghazi Union, Sadar Upazila, Dinajpur district. It is about 7 km north of Dinajpur town.

(Source : This image of Chehel Ghazi Mosque was taken by the author. Sania Sitara, 'A Survey of Archaeological Remains of Greater Dinajpur', *Unpublished Thesis*, University of Dhaka, 2006, p. 66)

The mosque is square in shape with 4.90 meters on each side. Also, it has a single-domed prayer chamber flanked by a



narrow vaulted verandah on the east.¹¹ This style in Bengal was later seen in Sura Mosque in Ghoraghat, Chamkati, Rajbibi, Lotan mosque in Gaur and Shankar Pasha Mosque in Sylhet.¹² But mosques of this style have three domes over a verandah and a dome over the main room. This popular practice continued till the Mughal era.

Mosque Plan of Chehel Ghazi

(Source : Sania Sitara, 'A Survey of Archaeological Remains of Greater Dinajpur', *Unpublished Thesis*, University of Dhaka, 2006, p. 66)

Some people believe that the said mosque has been converted



(Source : The image of Decoration of Chehel Ghazi Mosque's Mihrab has been taken by the author herself. Sania Sitara, 'A Survey of Archaeological Remains of Greater Dinajpur', *Unpublished Thesis*, University of Dhaka, 2006, p. 68)

were taken from another building. It can be assumed that bricks from a destroyed temple were used in building this mosque.¹⁴



(Source : This Image of Southern Arch of Chehel Ghazi Mosque has been taken by the author herself. Sania Sitara, 'A Survey of Archaeological Remains of Greater Dinajpur', *Unpublished Thesis*, University of Dhaka, 2006, p. 207)

from a square Shiva temple. But there is no logic behind such an idea. The mihrab, the dome, the entrance and above all the architecture of this building is completely that of a mosque. It has nothing to do with the structure of a temple. Although there are remains of a large Gauripatta Shiva temple, stone and brick from the ancient times, two ponds with barred ghats indicating that the area had a flourishing pre-muslim habitation with a temple.¹³ According to the description of Westmacott (1874), the stones used in the mosque

The mihrabs of the mosque are beautifully decorated with stones and terracotta plaques with the mihrab on the west wall showing the use of stone designs on bricks. This represents the mosque building style of the Sultani Period of Bengal.

Ghazi Shrine(Mazar)

The Shrine is located at the premises of the Chehel Ghazi mosque. No inscriptions indicating the period of the shrine have been found. The then Deputy Commissioner of Dinajpur, Mr. Westmacott recovered three inscriptions from Chehel Ghazi Mosque in 1874 CE.



(Source : This image of Chehel Ghazi Shrine has been taken by the author herself. Sania Sitara, 'A Survey of Archacological Remains of Greater Dinajpur', *Unpublished Thesis*, University of Dhaka, 2006, p. 207)

One of these is preserved in the Dinajpur Museum. From this inscription it is known that the shrine (Mazar) was renovated during the construction of the Chehel Ghazi Mosque in 1460 CE. So, the shrine existed before the mosque. The inscription does not mention Chehel Ghazi or any other name. Chehel Ghazi Shrine is first known from Buchanan Hamilton's report.¹⁵ Martin's book (1838 CE) also mentions the shrine but none of these sources mention the time period of the shrine.¹⁶

According to local tradition, forty Ghazis (religious warriors) were buried here together. It is a mass grave which after renovation has a length of 19 meters. Hence the name of the place is Chehel (forty) Ghazi and the shrine is Chehel Ghazi Mazar. The Ghazis fought against a local Hindu king named Gopal and were martyred. In all probability, the war was fought during Sultan Shams-ud-din Iliyas Shah's invasion of Kamrup (1358 CE). Two more such battles were fought nearby at Kantanagar (Garh Mallikpur) and Khansama and

the dead soldiers there were also buried together. The mazar was probably paved after the war ended. After about a century in 1460 CE, the shrine was repaired.¹⁷

Chehel Ghazi Inscription

Chehel Ghazi is an ancient area of Dinajpur. The inscription that is going to be discussed was recovered from the eastern outer wall of the dilapidated Chehel Ghazi mosque. In 1874 CE, the Deputy Commissioner of Dinajpur, Mr. Westmacott recovered the inscription from the Chehel Ghazi Mosque and kept it in the district Treasury. A copy of the inscription was sent to Bengal Asiatic Society for decipherment. Mr. Blochmann first translated and published the inscription in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*.¹⁸ Later the inscription was kept in the Khwaja Nazimuddin Hall Library in Dinajpur. Currently the inscription is preserved in Dinajpur Museum. The inscription measures 0.56×0.25 meters. The language of the inscription is Arabic interspersed with Persian words.

Image of the Chehel Ghazi Mosque Inscription



(Source :This image of Chehel Ghazi Mosque inscription has been taken by the author herself. Sania Sitara, 'A Survey of Archaeological Remains of Greater Dinajpur', *Unpublished Thesis*, University of Dhaka, 2006, p. 207)

Text:

نصر من الله وفتح قريب و بشر المومنين. بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم. فالله خير حافظا و هو ارحم الراحمين. بناء المسجد في العهد السلطان ابن السلطان ركن الدنيا والدين ابو المجاهد باريك شاه سلطان ~~ابن محمود شاه سلطان~~ خلد الله ملكه وسلطانه بحكم اشارة خان اعظم و خاقان معظم پهلوى العصر والزمان الغ اقرار خان ~~سر لشكر~~ وزير ~~بانيخير~~ مسجد مذکور و مرمت کرده روضه خان اعظم خاقان معظم الغ نصرت خان جنگدار و ~~شيدار معاملات~~ جور و ~~برور~~ ~~محلها~~ ديگر في التاريخ السادس عشر من الشهر الصفر ختمه الله بالخير والظفر شهور سنة خمس و ستين و ثمانماية.

(Source: Abdul Karim, 'Corpus of the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal', Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992, p. 152-154.)¹⁹

According to the scholars who deciphered the inscription, it mentions two verses from the Holy Quran. Then it goes on to describe the ruler who is Sultan Rukun Uddin Barbak Shah, son of Sultan Mahmud Shah. According to the inscription, the mosque was built by a commander and wazir, Ulugh Iqrar Khan. Ulugh Nusrat Khan repaired the tomb of the mosque who is also described as Jaungdar and Shiqdar of Jor and Barur. The renovation of the mosque is dated 16th Safar, 865 AH or 1st December, 1460 CE.²⁰

Blochmann was the first to decipher the text of Chehel Ghazi inscription.²¹ Later Shamsud-din Ahmed²² and Abdul Karim²³ mentioned the deciphered version of the text in their writings. The different versions of the deciphered text doesn't vary that much. But some parts of the inscription were clogged with whitewash.²⁴ As it was clogged, the lost words were filled out by assumption of the persons who gave it a reading. The name Iqrar Khan wasn't mentioned in the inscription but it was assumed by the above-mentioned scholars. Meanwhile, the designation was included in the inscription and the person Iqrar Khan had the same designation as mentioned in the Mahi-santosh and the Tribeni Inscriptions. It is possible that these scholars took the name from Mahi-santosh and Tribeni inscriptions because of its relevance.

According to Shamsuddin Ahmed, under the instructions of Ulugh Iqrar Khan, Ulugh Nusrat Khan built the Chehel Gazi mosque and repaired the shrine. Nusrat Khan is mentioned

as 'Jangdar' and 'Shiqdar'. 'Jangdar' means warrior but it is implied that Nusrat Khan was in-charge of a regiment under Iqrar Khan. 'Shiqdar' implies that he was also an executive officer equivalent to modern-day sub-divisional officer.²⁵ According to Westmacott, the name 'Barur' mentioned in the inscription is a modern day pargana of Purnia district with the same name, outside the western border of Dinajpur.²⁶ Nothing is mentioned by these scholars about 'Jor' and its whereabouts.

Barbak Shah was mentioned as a "Malik" meaning prince in the past inscriptions rather than a Sultan. The Tribeni inscription was the last of its kind to mention him as a 'Malik' or prince. Chehel Ghazi Inscription was the first to mention him as the Sultan. Thus, it is clear that he ascended the throne sometime after 864 Hijri or 1459 CE, when Tribeni Inscription was inscribed. When Chehel Ghazi inscription was inscribed in 865 Hijri or 1460 CE, he is mentioned as the Sultan.

According to Mr. Westmacott, this inscription was placed on the front wall of the mosque and there were two other inscriptions on the side of it. He also said that 'Mohr-e-Nabawat' (Seal of Prophethood) was inscribed at the center of the two inscriptions in 'Toghra' script.²⁷

Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq mentions and shows a picture of the Chehel Gazi mosque inscription which was found near the shrine of Chehel Gazi.²⁸ Although the picture shown by Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq does not match the inscription currently preserved at Dinajpur Museum and discussed by authors like Abdul Karim, Shamsuddin Ahmed and A K M Zakaria. Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq also mentions an unnamed and unidentified inscription found in Dinajpur which matches the picture of the Chehel Gazi mosque inscription at Dinajpur Museum and discussed by other authors.²⁹ Both the inscriptions mentioned by Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq contain a similar meaning to the inscription discussed in the article.

Currently there is only one Chehel Gazi mosque inscription preserved at Dinajpur Museum. It should be noted that there are some discrepancies in the readings of Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq. In one of the inscriptions, Siddiq mentions the date as 16th Safar, 865 AH and 1st December, 1560 CE but everyone else mentions the year as 1460 CE. In the other inscription which matches the picture of the inscription discussed in the article, he mentions the date as 26th Safar, 875 AH while everyone else mentions it as 16th Safar, 865 AH.

Despite these discrepancies, he says that the word ‘Shiqdar’ means land measurer which can also be translated as executive officer of the said time period. While others translate the title of Iqrar Khan as ‘hero of the age and time’, it is important to mention the Arabic words of the inscription which is ‘Pahlawi Asr wal-zaman’. This title appears in several inscriptions found in Bengal and commonly used to create an impression of valorous and glorious personality. Pahlawi was one of the most renowned imperial dynasties of ancient Persia. Other titles mentioned in the said inscription were derived from the Turkic dialect as well. The use of these titles gives importance to the dominance of Turkic elements in the medieval Bengal.³⁰

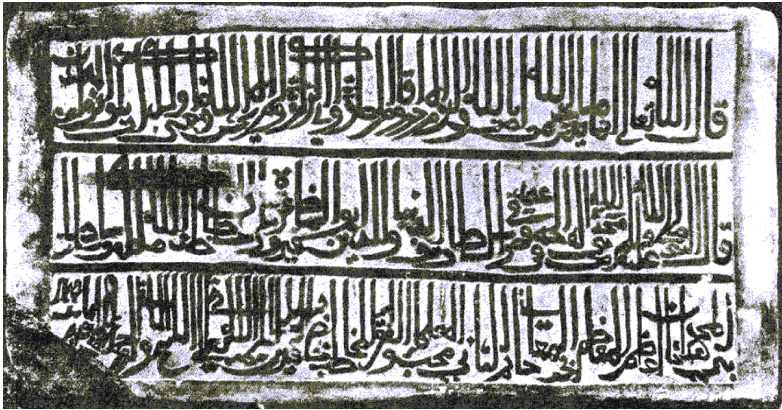
But those two inscriptions were not found afterwards. The inscription quoted above has historical importance. The script was engraved during the reign of the Sultans of the Iliyas Shahi dynasty. Verification of the inscriptional data provides evidence of Iliyas Shahi rule in the Dinajpur region and indicates the royal boundaries. Chehel Ghazi can be assumed to have been a significant center of Muslim rule in the pre-Mughal period. The brick-built old graves and ponds, mosque inscriptions, piles of broken bricks etc. bear the historical importance of Chehel Ghazi.

Biról Inscription

The inscription was found in Biról upazila of Dinajpur district in the year 1923. The zamindar of Bolihar, Babu Upendra Prasad Lahiri Chowdhury recovered the inscription from the

graves of two saints known as 'Burapir' and 'Panchpir' in his zamindari of Buzurg Biswanathpur in P.S Biral, Dinajpur. Later he handed it over to Barendra Research Society. The inscription is currently preserved in Varendra Museum, Rajshahi.³¹ Although the script was found at that place, no mosque exists there at present. The script measures 0.43×0.28 meters. The script is in Arabic.

Biral Inscription Image



(Source : Abdul Karim, *Corpus of the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal*, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992, plate no. 30b)

Text:

قال الله تعالى انما يعمر مساجد الله من امن بالله واليوم الآخر و اقام الصلوة و اتى الزكوة و لم يخش الا الله فعسى اولئك ان يكونوا من المهتدين. قال النبي صلى الله عليه و سلم من بنى مسجدا بنى الله له فى الجنة قصرا فى عهد السلطان سيف الدنيا و الدين ابو المظفر فيروز شاه سلطان خلد الله ملكه و سلطانه. بنى هذا المسجد خان اعظم المعظم بحر المعانى حاتم الثانى محب العلماء و الفقراء المخاطب بخطاب قيرن خان سلمه الله تعالى فى التاريخ الثانى و العشر جمادى الاخر سنة سبع ثمانين وثمانه مائة.

(Source : Abdul Karim, *Corpus of the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal*, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992, p.214-215.³²)

According to the scholars who deciphered the inscription, it begins with a verse from the Holy Quran and a Hadith of the Prophet of Islam. Then it goes on to describe the contemporary ruler, praised as the Second 'Hatim', Sultan

Saifuddin Firuz Shah. Then it mentions the builder of the mosque and date of construction.

According to Abdul Karim, the mosque was built by Qiran Khan on 12 Jamadi II, 887 AH (29 July, 1482 CE).³³ Although, Shamsuddin Ahmed gave a different opinion saying that the mosque was built by Kirat Khan on 12 Jamadi I, 880 AH (9 October, 1475 CE).³⁴ The inscription was first deciphered by Maulvi Shaikh Sharaf Uddin, when he was a Lecturer at Rajshahi University.³⁵ Later Maulvi Shamsuddin Ahmed published another reading of the inscription, which is similar to the reading of Sharaf Uddin.³⁶ According to the reading of Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, the inscription is dated 12 Jamadi II, 889 AH (July, 1484). As the inscription refers to Saifuddin Firuz Shah, he is the one mentioned as a charitable person and indicated as the second 'Hatim'.

The Later Ilyas Shahi dynasty ended with Sultan Fateh Shah in the year 893 AH. During the Ilyas Shahi rule, Abyssinians held many strong positions. One of them was Malik Andil. According to *Tarikh-i-Firista* and *Riazuz Salatin*, Malik Andil was a provincial ruler and a loyal and faithful servant of Sultan Fateh Shah. But the Ilyas Shahi rulers suppressed the Abyssinians which might have been the reason Malik Andil revolted and declared himself as the Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah. If the Birol mosque was built in 887 AH or 889 AH as mentioned by Abdul Karim and Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq respectively, Malik Andil revolted during the reign of Fateh Shah. On the other hand, if the mosque was built in the year 880 AH as mentioned by Shamsuddin Ahmed and Sharaf Uddin, the revolt happened during the reign of Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah.

Sultan Fateh Shah was killed by Barbak Shahzada or Sultan Shahzada in the year 893 AH.³⁷ According to the sources, the widow of Fateh Shah requested Malik Andil or Firuz Shah to avenge her husband's death. This led to the rebellion of Firuz Shah against Sultan Shahzada that eventually killed him and handed the throne of Gaur to Firuz Shah.³⁸ The Birol

inscription is important in the sense that it clarifies some assumptions of the motives of Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah. Firuz Shah revolted during the reign of Fateh Shah, so when he avenged his death, it can be assumed that it was more of a power grabbing strategy rather than a matter of loyalty. Therefore, the Birol inscription is an important element in reconstructing the history of the later Ilyas Shahi dynasty and the Abyssinian Sultans i.e. Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah.

Concluding Remarks

Archaeological and historical heritage objects mentioned above clearly indicate cultural and religious assimilative and syncretism processes in the Bengal region in general and Dinajpur district in particular. Almost all the inscriptions found at Dinajpur bear a character of plural religious symbols. It is to be accepted by all that architectural objects like mosques, imambaras and temples were built for religious purposes for sure. Example can be taken from the Birol mosque inscription where it is stated that, 'Whoever builds a mosque in this world, Allah will build for him a palace in heaven.' This religious-cultural symbol was absolutely new to the settlers of the land. The people of the land were used to perform their own religious-cultural rituals and practices for ages. These heritage objects and inscriptional evidences proved the inter cultural conflict, consensus and assimilation of cultures and religious belief systems between folk/ little and institutional/great traditions that amalgamated in the land of Bengal.

On the other hand, the new political power and their rule over a vast area of Bengal including Dinajpur was evidenced by the Chehel Ghazi inscription. From this inscription, it is to be known that the latter Ilyas Shahi kingdom captured Dinajpur too. Birol inscription is important evidence in understanding the historical context and development of the later Ilyas Shahi dynasty and the rise of the Habsi rulers in the Bengal region in general and Dinajpur in particular.

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